

ELLEN BEACH YAW



"LARK ELLEN"
THE PHENOMENAL AMERICAN
SOPRANO, WHOSE RANGE
EXTENDED FROM G BELOW
MIDDLE C TO
THE HIGHEST E ON THE PIANO

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COMPACT
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DIGITAL AUDIO

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ELLEN BEACH YAW
The Recordings

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. ECKERT: Swiss Echo Song | 10. PAER: O Dolce Contento |
| 2. DELIBES - LAKME: Bell Song | 11. MEYERBEER - L'ETOILE DU
NORD - Cadenza |
| 3. DONIZETTI - LUCIA: Mad
Scene | (Recordings made 1899-1913) |
| 4. MASSE - LES NOCES DE
JEANNETTE: The Nightingale | Total Playing time: 38' 28" |
| 5. SMITH: The Star Spangled
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| 8. YAW: The Skylark | |
| 9. AUBER - MANON LESCAUT:
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ELLEN BEACH YAW

ELLEN BEACH YAW (1869-1947) was popularly known as "Lark Ellen"; this sobriquet was bestowed on her by General Otis, the founder of the LOS ANGELES TIMES, on first hearing her sing at a concert in Los Angeles. Yaw was also known as "The California Lark", both nicknames arising from her great vocal range which in her prime was from G below middle C to the highest E on the piano. In addition to this great vocal range, she could sing trills on 3rds and 5ths, an unequalled feat. She is credited with having sung the highest notes in musical history.

Ellen Beach Yaw was born in a small town in Erie County, New York State, in Boston, New York, which is located a few miles north of Buffalo, New York. She attended the Springville

Institute, in Springville, New York, a few miles from Boston, where she learned shorthand and typing, which enabled her to take a position as secretary to a lawyer at only fourteen years of age. She also gave lessons in shorthand in the evenings, and soon she had saved enough money to be able to study voice under Charles Whitmore, of Minneapolis, the first of her teachers. She later went to New York City to study under the Swedish tenor Theodore Bjorksten, a colleague of the great Christine Nilsson (1843-1921). After a few lessons he told her that in the future she would be taught by his wife, Mme. Bjorksten, who later became the famous voice teacher Madame Torpadie.

One day, while she was singing in the open air, Ellen's voice

seemed to soar higher and higher; curious to see what note she had reached she ran to a piano where she found that she had just sung the E in altissimo. On telling Mme. Bjorksten of this experience, and that it had inspired her to write a special cadenza for one of her songs, the teacher asked her to render this at an approaching concert. At the close a New York Times reporter hurried to her to ask what the high note was. On being told he expressed his astonishment, and declared that it must have been the highest note ever reached by the human voice. It was Mme. Bjorksten who later took Ellen on her first visit to Europe, financed, like many an artist before her, by money advanced by a discerning friend. In Paris she sang for Mme. Bjorksten's old teacher, Ernesto Delle Sedie, who had sung with Adelina Patti, and he was very encouraging in his comments.

Later on she was to study with him. Mme. Bjorksten also introduced her to Christine Nilsson, who was greatly impressed by her E in altissimo. In 1894, Ellen Beach Yaw made her official début in St. Paul, Minnesota, and in the autumn of 1895 toured Switzerland and the Rhineland. Returning to America she appeared with Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony Orchestra in two concerts in 1896 at Carnegie Hall, together with Pol Plançon and Riccardo Stracciari.

From the 1890s onwards she sang under the baton of many noted conductors such as Sir Henry Wood, Sir Dan Godfrey, Victor Herbert and Camille Saint-Saëns. At a recital in the Paris home of Mathilde Marchesi Massenet played for her the accompaniment to his lovely song, "Elégie", and, after Miss Yaw's performance Massenet stood up and bowed to her, the

only time he rose from the piano during the recital.

On 29th November 1899, Yaw appeared in the title rôle in Sir Arthur Sullivan's opera THE ROSE OF PERSIA, at the Savoy Theatre in London. For her great aria 'NEATH MY LATTICE, Sir Arthur wrote a special cadenza. It was during the rehearsals for THE ROSE OF PERSIA that Ellen Beach Yaw met Lady Valerie Meux who made the young singer her protégée and arranged for her to go to the great Madame Marchesi in Paris for further vocal study.

On 16th February 1902 she made her true operatic début in her favourite rôle of Ophelia in Thomas' opera HAMLET at the Nice Opera House. Thus the Anglo-American of Nice: "Great interest attended the production of "Hamlet" at the Nice Opera House last evening, for the occasion was the début of a fair and gifted young American

singer, Mlle. Yaw, who possesses a lovely voice, a fine appearance and histrionic gifts of the very highest order. In the famous "Mad Scene" Mlle. Yaw, by her powerful and artistic rendering, created quite a furore of applause and we regret that limited space prevents us at the moment from saying more than that a brilliant future is surely in store for this talented young artist."

In the cities of Rome, Naples and in Catania, she appeared in twenty-three operatic performances, under the name of Signorina Elena Elvanna, making her Italian operatic début at the Teatro Quirino in Rome on 17th February 1905. In Naples, Ellen sang at both the Teatro Mercadante and the Teatro Bellini, appearing in the title rôle of Donizetti's LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR in March 1905. On 5th June 1905 she appeared in the rôle of Elvira in Bellini's I PURITANI at the Teatro Bellini.

In Catania, she appeared five times in one week as the Page in Verdi's BALLO. In London at the Waldorf Theatre (now the Strand) she appeared in two performances as Gilda in RIGOLETTO in July 1905.

On 21st March 1908, Miss Yaw sang the title rôle in Donizetti's LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York, with Bonci and Stracciari, creating a great sensation in the famous "Mad Scene". She was obliged to repeat the cadenza with flute and received 29 curtain calls. Early next morning she received a telephone call from Heinrich Conreid, then Manager of the Metropolitan, inviting her round to see him. As she entered his office, he greeted her with the words: "I am authorised by the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Opera Company to offer to you a three year contract. You are the world's greatest coloratura soprano." At

the same time, the Manager of the Vienna Opera House offered a three year contract; but she turned down both offers as her concert tour for 1908-1909 was already booked. Oscar Hammerstein, of the Manhattan Opera House, had also offered her engagements, but again due to her touring she felt unable to accept. As Miss Yaw remarked to me in later years "Opera is very hard work and I make more money in one concert than any opera company can pay me!" The following press extracts give some idea of Ellen Beach Yaw's reception at the Metropolitan: New York Press: "The appearance of Ellen Beach Yaw for the first time at the Metropolitan Opera House was yesterday's operatic feature in New York. Miss Yaw's coloratura is more perfect than Mme Tetrizzini's, her scales are lighter and more fluent, her trills are much more flexible, precise, and

speedy. She performed the difficult cadenza in the "Mad Scene" with all the fioritura heard so often from Mme. Tetrzzini, and the final E flat with exceeding ease and accuracy, and much charm. Technically it was a more finished achievement than the other soprano's."

Reginald de Koven, in the New York World: "Miss Yaw is nearly an octave, six whole tones above Tetrzzini. Think of it, ye who have acclaimed the famous high E flat as phenomenal and wonder-working. And yet this is actually in the marvellous compass in the high register of up to double high C, of Ellen Beach Yaw, who made her New York debut in Grand Opera last night, at the Metropolitan, as Lucia in Donizetti's LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR and with no small success. She sang *Quando Rapito* in excellent style, and finished it with an extraordinary

note - a real note - not a squeak - not merely touched, but held - a G in altissimo. These wonderful tones Miss Yaw certainly possesses to make an audience gape with open-mouthed astonishment, as they did last night. Miss Yaw can be credited with a very distinct success."

Her operatic repertoire included the leading rôles in Hamlet, Lucia, Roméo et Juliette, Les Huguenots, I Puritani, Un Ballo in Maschera, Die Zauberflöte, Faust, La Traviata, La Bohème, Adriana Lecouvreur, Don Giovanni, Il Barbiere, Le Nozze di Figaro and Lakmé which, she told me "she knew from a to z". Miss Yaw sang for many of the crowned heads of Europe, and for President McKinley. The name Y-a-w was originally spelled G-h-n-e-a-u in the ancient French, and she was a descendant of the unfortunate Huguenots. Ellen Beach Yaw

died on 9th September 1947 at her beautiful mansion, "Lark's Nest" in Covina, California. 9th September is the anniversary of California's entry into the Union - an appropriate date for the demise of one known as "The California Lark".

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